

VZCZCXYZ0001
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTU #1213/01 3451306
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 101306Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5808
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS PRIORITY 7711
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 0005
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY

UNCLAS TUNIS 001213

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

NEA/MAG (SWILLIAMS, MNARDI, MHAYES)
STATE ALSO FOR H - PLEASE PASS CODEL HASTINGS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: OREP PGOV PREL TS
SUBJECT: CODEL HASTINGS PRESSES GOT ON 2009 ELECTION
OBSERVERS

Summary

¶1. (SBU) In December 3 meetings with Tunisia's Minister of Foreign Affairs and six parliamentarians, Representative Alcee Hastings pressed the importance of credible international election observers for Tunisia's 2009 presidential and parliamentary elections. He discussed increased multilateral engagement and potential policies of the incoming US administration. Congressman Hastings also invited the Tunisian Parliamentarians to participate in an upcoming OSCE parliamentary meeting he is organizing in Washington and to put an intern in his Washington office.
End Summary.

Credible Election Observers Encouraged

¶2. (SBU) During his December 3 meeting with Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdelwaheb Abdallah, Representative Alcee Hastings inquired about plans for international election observers for Tunisia's 2009 presidential and legislative elections. Noting that he had been responsible for persuading then-Secretary Colin Powell to accept international election observers for US elections in 2004, Hastings made the case that Tunisia also accept international election observers. Abdallah noted that during the 2004 elections Tunisia hosted observers from the African Union, Arab League, and select members of the European Union. He added that President Ben Ali has publicly stated that both international observers and journalists will be invited to observe the 2009 elections. Representative Hastings offered that OSCE observers were well known for their excellent work.

¶3. (SBU) In a later meeting with Chair of the Committee on Political Affairs and Foreign Relations Salah El Tabarki, Chair of the Tunisian-American Friendship Caucus El Tijani Haddad, Reporter of the Committee on Political Affairs and Foreign Relations Abdelatif Ben El Makki, Secretary General of the Socialist Democratic Movement Ismail Bou Lahia, Popular Union Party representative Hichem El Hajji, and the General Director of Foreign Relations for the Chamber of Deputies Ahmed Labidi, Representative Hastings again queried about plans for international election monitoring. While the majority of the parliamentarians repeated that President Ben Ali has publicly endorsed the notion, one parliamentarian opined that international observers would not be necessary in 2009, suggesting that Tunisia could handle its own affairs. Interjecting, Representative Hastings reminded him that international observers are essential for establishing legitimacy.

Multilateral Participation

¶4. (SBU) When asked by Representative Hastings about Tunisia's stance on the Barcelona Process compared to the Union for the Mediterranean, Minister Abdallah noted that Tunisia viewed favorably regional efforts. He noted that Tunisia had initially been a strong supporter of the Barcelona Process. With respect to the UPM, Abdallah cautioned that Tunisia has become less enthusiastic as cultural differences with "the Nordic countries of the European Union" have created an "imbalance" and suggested that the focus of future efforts should be regional, offering Mediterranean depollution as a tangible example. Abdallah noted that some problems, such as the situation in Iraq, may take more than four years to resolve. In response, Representative Hastings asked how long it will take to resolve the situation in Western Sahara, receiving a reply of "two generations".

¶5. (SBU) The Tunisian parliamentarians predicted failure for any Mediterranean Union proposal, if societal issues are not placed above economic concerns. Blaming the failure of the Barcelona process on a lack of social emphasis, the parliamentarians said that a successful, sustainable process would focus on education and culture. Offering a concrete proposal for cross cultural exchange, Representative Hastings then offered to host a Tunisian intern in his office after reminding the parliamentarians of the need to work together to solve regional problems, including the issue of Western Sahara, about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the

situation in Iraq. Noting that OSCE's Mediterranean partners could provide needed substantive political direction on regional issues, Representative Hastings invited the Tunisian parliamentarians to participate in an upcoming parliamentary meeting in Washington. Separately, Tijani Haddad told the Ambassador that he hoped to bring a Tunisian delegation to Washington and would consider doing so concurrent to the OSCE parliamentary meeting.

New Administration

¶6. (SBU) Both Abdallah and the Members of Parliament offered their congratulations on the election of President-elect Barack Obama. Representative Hastings indicated that future high level visits may be possible, an idea that elicited delight among his Tunisian interlocutors. Abdallah said that the world's attention has been grabbed and there is now an opportunity to introduce new policies, while the parliamentarians expressed optimism that the United States would lead by example. They also said that they would like to have a closer relationship with the US Congress, expressing interest in the Tunisia Caucus.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) Congressman Hastings' interlocutors seemed to be genuinely enthusiastic about increased engagement in their meetings with Representative Hastings. Congressman Hastings' gentle encouragement on election observers was effective and useful. Abdallah's expressed dissatisfaction with the Nordic influence on the UPM is the clearest he has been recently in relating GOT views on this new entity. End Comment.

¶8. (SBU) CODEL Hastings did not have the opportunity to see this cable before their departure, but concurred with its issuance.
Godec